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COURAGE TO BE

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Scripture: Matthew 5:17-20 Deuteronomy 30:15-20

". . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."
Deuteronomy 30:19 (NRSV)

Bernie Siegel is a surgeon, a professor at Yale University and the author of several bestselling and very helpful books. In one of them, *Love, Medicine and Miracles,* he asks what, for most people, is the worst thing that could be said to us. The three most dreaded words in our language, Siegel says, are "You have cancer." People who hear those words, Dr. Siegel reports, experience many emotions — denial, anger, fear — and they are heard, by many, as the end: the end of hope, possibility and any sense of personal power over the future. The great risk, he says, is that they cause people to give up and turn over their future to fate, or their illness, or their doctor.

So Siegel talks a lot about being responsible for life regardless of how sick you are, and making choices, and the will to live. He puts his patients in support groups to help them be responsible for their lives, their illness, and their treatment. The first question he asks after saying the dreaded three words is, "Do you want to live to be one hundred years old?" Siegel is convinced, as is a growing portion of the health care community, that the will to live is deep within us, that it is not at all an abstraction but a physiological reality, and that we have some responsibility for it . . . it is our will. It is, finally, a matter of our choices. And in that fascinating sentiment he reflects an idea found in an account of an event that happened more than 3,000 years ago.

It was an occasion of high anxiety, fear, excitement, potential, and not a little dread. The children of Israel are standing on a hill, over the Jordan River, looking across and seeing for the very first time, the Promised Land. They had escaped from Egyptian slavery a generation before. For forty years they had lived as nomads in the vast desert of Sinai, wandering from place to place, oasis to oasis. Moses, their liberator and leader, always prodding, pulling, pushing, scolding, teaching, preaching. But now Moses is old. He isn't going across the river. His time has come. And so he says a lot of things to them by way of summing up and gives them a lot of advice, and admonishes them to do the right thing and obey the law and hold on to one another. And the climax of what he says on that occasion is this:

> "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so you and your descendants may live."

What Moses wanted the people to choose was to obey the commandments, the law of God, and to resist being intimidated by or assimilated into the culture of the people who were already living in the Promised Land — the Canaanites. They would not survive as a people if they did that. It was going to require discipline, strength and courage to be God's people. Moses was clear. The matter was in their hands and hearts. The choice to survive, to live or not to live is theirs. Life is their responsibility.

Until that time people were convinced that someone or something else is in charge; how things turn out in life is a matter of the whim of the gods, or fate, or luck. Here is a new idea — the responsibility belongs to the people. Life or death is their option.

It is an idea that has intrigued the philosophers, theologians and artists.

It's what William Shakespeare is exploring and wrestling with in Hamlet:

> ". . .O God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world."

Hamlet laments. And then, in the lines that put the matter clearly and powerfully —

"To be, or not to be: that is the question."

Rollo May, a psychiatrist, philosopher, has written a lot about it. He was a student and admirer of the great theologian, Paul Tillich, who wrote one of the pivotal books of our century, *The Courage To Be,* from which I took the title for this sermon and from which Rollo May took the title for a book he wrote: *The Courage to Create.* In that book May argues — consistent with Moses — that you and I are responsible for our being.

He is also enough of a psychiatrist to know that it is not simple and certainly not automatic. What he calls "an assertion of self," the decision to be, is for many people a difficult challenge. It requires moral and spiritual courage. Because the truth is that life sometimes knocks that out of us. Fear of cancer can knock it out of us. Fear of the future, fear of the people who are already living in the Promised Land can cause us essentially to give up and give in and to choose non-being, instead of being.

Sometimes an institution, a large powerful structure, can do that to us. It is difficult to get enough distance away from slavery and the deep, deep racism which allowed it and then continued to grow out of it — to understand its effects on the spirits of its victims. But this we do know — slavery was itself an evil, life denying structure, which said an uncompromising "no" to everything we understand to constitute meaningful life. How to affirm yourself — in a system that denies that you are a self?

The miracle is that somehow it happened. Even in the midst of slavery and its attendant racism, there were individuals whose sense of self was so strong it would not and could not be denied, and who were like Moses - standing on the mountain looking into the future and urging the people to choose life: Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth . . . born into slavery, purchased and freed by Quakers, she became a preacher and spokesperson for the abolition movement; she conferred with President Lincoln, taught and counseled in the Washington, DC slums and personally integrated the Washington, DC streetcars. She became a feminist and in 1854 at a Women's Rights Convention in Akron was told repeatedly by male clergy that as a member of the weaker sex she should defer to men and to be content to be wife, mother and helper. Her response was the memorable "Ain't I A Woman" speech.

> "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place, and ain't I am woman? Look at me. I have plowed, and planted and gather into barns, and no man could beat me . . . and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the last as well . . . and ain't I a woman?"
> [Thanks to Gerald J. Gregg, Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio, *Sojourner Truth: Faith Hero,* 1/17/93]

What happened after slavery was a deeply entrenched racism which in insidious ways — some of them in the legal system and others of them in the hearts of the dominant culture — continued to deny the being, the humanity of African Americans. And still the courage to be emerged.

Frequently it was in the context of religion that the courage to be was nurtured.

In Toni Morrison's wonderful novel, *Beloved,* there is a marvelous account. An old woman preacher, known to the African American community in Cincinnati after the Civil War as Baby Suggs, calls the community together in a clearing in the woods on a warm Saturday. Listen to the way Toni Morrison wrote it:

"After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, 'Let the children come!' and they ran from the trees toward her.

"'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

"Then 'Let the grown men come,' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

"'Let your wives and your children see you dance,' she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

"Finally she called the women to her. 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

"It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

"She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

"She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

"'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it . . . And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! . . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you.'" [*Beloved*, pp. 87, 88]

The descriptions of what life is like for the children in Cabrini Green reveal a system which in every way denies their humanity, their very being until in self-fulfilling prophecy, they — the children — start to die. Who can ever forget Tea Akbar telling us that tutoring youngsters don't respond when asked a question about how they are, or how they feel, because no one ever asked them that before.

It is not so dramatic for most of us. But the courage to be, the will to choose life can be knocked out of us by unemployment, for instance, and its inevitable aftermath of self-doubt, and then self-dislike, moving toward self-hate and eventually the paralysis of depression. Or it can be fear — fear not so much of death, but of life. What if I fail? What if I stumble? What if it doesn't work out? What if he leaves me? Or it can be an addiction: a dependency that leaves you feeling powerless, out of control of your life. Or it can be abuse, physical, sexual abuse that leaves deep scars and anger and a devastated sense of self that is not willing to risk happiness and joy and full life. Or the will to live can be knocked out of us, I believe, by boredom — which Parker Palmer calls the major spiritual malady of our age; the dead weight of inertia, the daily grind which saps our physical and emotional energy.

One of Bernie Siegel's patients, an 85 year-old woman (Nadine Stair), confronting death wrote a poem.

"If I had my life to live over, . . .
I would take more chances, I would take more
Trips, I would scale more mountains,
I would swim more rivers, and I would
Watch more sunsets. I would eat more
Ice cream and fewer beans.
I would have more actual troubles
And fewer imaginary ones. You see . . .
I was one of those people who lived
Prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,
Hour after hour and day after day. . . .
I've been
One of those people who never went anywhere without
A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a
Raincoat and a parachute . . .
If I had it to do all over again,
I'd travel lighter, much lighter,
Thank I have.
I would start barefoot earlier
In the spring, and I'd stay that way
Later in the fall. And I would
Ride more merry-go-rounds, and
Catch more gold rings, and greet
More people, and pick more flowers,
And dance more often. If I had it
To do all over again.
But you see,
I don't."
[*Peace, Love and Healing,* pp. 245,246]

"Choose this day" Moses said. Three times he says it; urgently, "today — this day — today." That is, the choice to be responsible for life is made, not once and for all, but every day. And, may I suggest, it is almost never as clear and simple as it is in that ancient picture of Moses admonishing the children of Israel to choose life. Rather — the choice, the occasion for courage to be comes wrapped up in other choices: to love or not to love; to get involved or to hold back; to serve and help or to withdraw; to commit self passionately and completely to some grand cause or to stay at arms length, a spectator instead of a participant, safely at home watching someone else's fantasy of what real life is on television.

Moses cast the issue in terms of deciding for God. God's way, God's will. Deciding simply to assert yourself, affirm yourself, be yourself, can, of course, be a rationale for absolute selfishness. The theological dimension saves it, redeems it. The bold proposal which is as old as Moses is that when we say yes to God we are, in a very profound sense, saying yes to life, to our life specifically.

To hear the call of Jesus Christ to follow — whether that call comes in your troubled conscience over the plight of the poor, or your impulse to care deeply about your neighbor, or your urge to give yourself totally and sacrificially to some great Christ-like endeavor; or whether the call of Christ comes as you sit in your pew on Sunday morning praying, or singing a great hymn in the church. However Jesus Christ calls you, I believe when you say yes — when you commit your life to him — you are, in the most real way of all, saying yes to your own life. Choosing life, starting to exercise your own courage to be.

In that little book on courage Rollo May wrote something I keep close at hand — as a daily reminder:

> "The essence of being human is that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things, in spite of the fact that time and death will ultimately claim us all." [*The Courage to Create,* p 19]

The gift of life is given to us — without condition. It is ours to use, to enjoy, to live. How we do that is a matter of will . . . courage.

If we hoard the gift of life, it becomes stale, hard, like bread, then it spoils.

From our Lord, the one we would follow, we have learned that to live the gift of life we must give it away . . . we must share the bread . . . in order to live . . . we need to love. . . .

The choice, is ours, daily . . . the Courage to Be.

"I have set before you life and death," Moses said, "Choose life."

Amen.